
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded…

Where the Sea Takes Us is Kim Huynh’s account of his family’s history through the tumult of Vietnam since the end of World War Two. He traces the lives of both his parents, born in the nineteen forties, as they endured first the Indochina War with France, the dictatorship of President Diem, the American military intervention and the triumph of the Viet Cong after the fall of Saigon. The insanity of communism is what finally forced the couple with their two young sons onto an unseaworthy boat heading towards Malaysia, where their ‘boat boss’ was lucky enough to be able to bribe naval officers to not to shoot them on sight or send them back to sea, according to Malaysian government policy, and to let them land and have contact with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. After a few months in a camp, living on a sufficient but unvarying diet, they arrived in Canberra in December 1979, his father determined that he would devote himself to his adopted country, with ‘the only proviso … that his family be free from communist control and that he never be forced to eat sardines again.’

Kim, their younger son, a heart-wrenchingly skeletal waif on his 1979 identity card who wouldn’t have survived without the help of the Médicins Sans Frontières, is now a politics lecturer at ANU, and this book is his tribute to his parents’ bravery and endurance, without which, of course, his life would have been unimaginably different. He makes it clear that he doesn’t claim his family’s story is unusual: indeed, they were among the lucky ones:

There are destitute and oppressed people worldwide, some of whom would view my family’s ordeals as relatively trifling. Indeed, we have friends and relatives whose wartime and postwar experiences were far more harrowing than ours.
Kim’s narrative is full of quiet admiration for his parents, and he writes with humour and candour, but without melodrama. He starts each of the nine chapters with a scene from the present day, a chat with his mother, or an attempt to teach his technologically-challenged father to use the internet. These introductions ground the extremes of the past in the blessedly mundane present, and provide a self-deprecating and appealing picture of their family life.

Kim does not have such admiration for all his relatives. His mother, though she was an educated and independent woman in her late twenties when she married, suffered in the traditional extended family home where the daughter-in-law is the lowliest of all creatures, and he is severe on his paternal grandmother and aunts who persecuted her shamelessly through two failed pregnancies before Kim’s older brother was born. Though it was communism that forced them to flee, the in-laws would in themselves have provided enough impetus for most people. One of the aunts, Huong, is one of the most colourful characters in the book. Adaptable, hard-hearted, selfish and opportunistic, she was able to prosper under any regime, thriving ‘like a glistening fern under the dense canopy of ideology’. Striking imagery like this appears throughout the book, along with wry subversions of traditional sayings. When his grandmother attributed their survival to the fact that ‘the heavens conceive elephants and bestow the grass for them to eat’, Kim’s father Thiet, at eleven, ‘was no longer able to accept such woolly explanations for the origins or the sustenance of elephants,’ and sought enlightenment temporarily with the Viet Minh.

Kim’s gratitude for his parents’ sacrifices, and respect for their ways, suffuses the book with a gentle, warm glow, without ever lapsing into sentimentality. Where the Sea Takes Us, despite its gruelling and sometimes horrific subject matter, is warm, intelligent and endearing.